

Basic Information and Incidence/Trends

1. What is HIV? What is AIDS?

HIV (Human Immunodeficiency Virus) is a virus. You may hear that someone is *HIV infected*, has *HIV infection*, or has *HIV disease*. These are all terms that mean the person has HIV in his or her body and can pass the virus to other people.

HIV attacks the body's immune system. The immune system protects the body from infections and disease, but has no clear way to protect it from HIV. Without treatment, most people infected with HIV become less able to fight off the germs that we are exposed to every day. Many of these germs do not usually make a healthy person sick, but they can cause life-threatening infections and cancers in a person whose immune system has been weakened by HIV. HIV treatments can slow this process and allow people with HIV to live longer, healthier lives (see question 66).

People infected with HIV may have no symptoms for ten or more years. They may not know they are infected. An HIV test is the only way to find out if you have HIV.

AIDS (Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome) is a late stage of HIV disease. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), a person with HIV infection has AIDS when he or she:

- has a CD4 cell count (a way to measure the strength of the immune system) that falls below 200. A normal CD4 cell count is 500 or higher.
- OR
- develops any of the specific, serious conditions – also called AIDS-defining illnesses – that are linked with HIV infection (see Appendix for a list of these conditions).

2. Who is at risk for getting HIV?

A person of any age, sex, race, ethnic group, religion, economic background, or sexual orientation can get HIV.

Those who are most at risk are:

- people who have “unprotected sex” with someone who has HIV. Unprotected sex means vaginal, anal, or oral sex without using a condom.
- people who share needles, syringes, or other equipment to inject drugs, steroids, or even vitamins or medicine with someone who has HIV.
- Babies can potentially become infected during their mothers' pregnancy, during delivery, or after birth in the immediate post-partum period. They can also become infected through breastfeeding.
- Health care and maintenance workers who may be exposed to blood and/or body fluids at work sometimes get infected through on-the-job exposures like needle-stick injuries (see question 31).

A person of any age, sex, race, ethnic group, religion, economic background, or sexual orientation can get HIV.

Before 1985, some people were infected through blood transfusions or the use of blood products. In May 1985, the United States began screening all blood products for HIV, so the risk of getting HIV from a blood transfusion today is now very low (see question 30).

You can **only** get HIV if infected blood, semen, vaginal fluids, or breast milk gets into your body (see question 9).

3. How long can people live with HIV or AIDS?

Medicines that fight HIV have helped many people with HIV and AIDS live years and even decades longer than was possible in the past, before effective treatment was available. HIV treatments are not a cure, and they do not work equally well for everyone, but they have extended the lives of many people with HIV and AIDS.

Without treatment, some people live for just a few years after getting HIV. Others live much longer. Researchers are studying a small number of people with HIV who have not become ill for more than ten years, even without any HIV treatment. However, these people are still infected with HIV and can pass the virus to others.

4. Can I get a vaccine to prevent HIV infection or AIDS?

No. There is no vaccine to prevent HIV infection. Researchers are working to develop a vaccine. Vaccines in development are being tested to find out if they work.

5. Is there a cure for HIV or AIDS?

No. There is no cure for HIV or AIDS. However, there are medicines that fight HIV and help people with HIV and AIDS live longer, healthier lives.

6. How many people are living with HIV and AIDS?

According to the United Nations organization UNAIDS, as of 2003 there were an estimated 40 million persons living with HIV and AIDS worldwide. Of these, 37 million were adults, and 2.5 million were under age 15. The overwhelming majority of persons with HIV live in resource-poor countries.

As of December 2002, 517,000 persons were known to be living with HIV and AIDS in the United States. The U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) estimates that 170,000 more Americans are infected with HIV but do not know it. Additionally, CDC estimates that 501,669 persons had died from AIDS in the U.S. as of December 2002.

7. What is the status of the HIV/AIDS epidemic in New York State?

As of December 2002, more than 157,000 persons in New York State had been diagnosed with AIDS; approximately 62,000 of those persons are still living. Of those 62,000 persons living with AIDS:

- 45% are African American.
- 30% are Hispanic.
- 23% are white.
- 0.8% are Asian/Pacific Islander.
- 0.1% are Native American.
- 29% are women.
- 4% are under the age of 25.
- 13% are over the age of 50.

AIDS has been diagnosed in people living in every county of New York State. However, 79% of New Yorkers currently living with AIDS were living in New York City at the time they were diagnosed.

In June 2000, New York State began reporting cases of people diagnosed with HIV only (not AIDS) in addition to reporting AIDS cases. Since then, New York State counts and reports HIV cases separately from AIDS cases. As of June 30, 2003, there were 29,892 persons in New York State living with HIV (but not AIDS). Of those persons:

- 46% are African American.
- 29% are Hispanic.
- 24% are white.
- 0.9% are Asian/Pacific Islanders.
- 0.1% are Native American.
- 36% are women.
- 14% are under the age of 25.
- 11% are over the age of 50.

Of those New Yorkers who are currently living with HIV (but not AIDS), 77% of them were living in New York City at the time they were diagnosed.

The State Department of Health also tracks the “risk factors” identified by people who test positive for HIV. The risk factor is the most likely way a person became infected. Of the persons currently living with AIDS in New York State:

- 31% have a risk factor of using intravenous drugs.
- 25% are men with a risk factor of having sex with men.
- 15% have a risk factor of heterosexual sex.

Injection drug use (through sexual contact with an injection drug user or infants infected prenatally) was the direct or indirect cause of infection for 44 percent of the persons in New York State who were living with AIDS as of December 2002. Of all cases with known risk, 52.3 percent are directly or indirectly attributable to injection drug use.

Risk factor information is currently unavailable for more than 40% of the people who are living with HIV only. Among the persons for whom risk data have been obtained:

- 41% are men with a risk factor of having sex with men.
- 27% have a risk factor of heterosexual sex.
- 22% have a risk factor of using IV drugs.

It is estimated that another 37,500 to 50,000 New Yorkers are infected with HIV but do not know it.

As of December 31, 2002, 80,088 New Yorkers had died from AIDS.

8. Where can I find updated statistics on HIV and AIDS?

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) posts statistics about HIV and AIDS in the United States on its website: www.cdc.gov. The CDC website is also available in Spanish at www.cdc.gov/spanish. Or you can call the CDC toll-free at 1-800-342-2437 (English) or 1-800-344-7432 (Spanish) to request information.

Global HIV/AIDS statistics are available from UNAIDS at www.unaids.org and from the World Health Organization at www.who.int/hiv.

Statistics about HIV and AIDS in New York State are listed on the State Department of Health website: www.health.state.ny.us. Or call the New York State HIV/AIDS Hotline to request information:

1-800-541-2437 (English)

1-800-233-7432 (Spanish)

HIV/AIDS TTY information line: (212) 925-9560.

Voice callers can use the New York Relay System:

call 711 or 1-800-421-1220 and ask the operator for (212) 925-9560.